



Enso

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Standing at the Bottom of the Mountain

by Eric Soroker

How did I get here?

There are no ordinary moments

What does it mean to be a committed martial artist?

“The important thing to know is this: To be ready at any moment to sacrifice what you are for what you could become.”

Charles Du Bos

Standing at the bottom of the mountain, I surveyed the map. I’m not a

seasoned hiker by any stretch of the definition, but I’m eager and willing. Grace and I were in the middle of a Colorado camping trip that included long drives and we had decided to stretch our legs with a quick hour hike into Rocky Mountain National Park.

Looking at the map’s dotted lines and hieroglyphs, my imagination quickly defined the entire hike for me; beautiful views, climbs without effort, and epic rewards that speak of a journey culminating in a grand destination. Heroic. Romantic. Bullshit.

When you’re at the bottom of a mountain, all you can really see is the trailhead. A slight, gently rising, crushed stone path cut between boulders that beckon. It’s the trail-

head and what you think the journey is about that seduce you. The rain starts to fall as we begin the excursion up.

The climb’s difficulty quickly increases and we walk single file on the twisting path taking turns leading. I distract myself with thoughts of how the high altitude will help my Aikido training.

Holding a smile on my face is becoming more difficult until it finally turns into a grimace. I let the “smiling mask” go and abandon it. I’m smiling on the inside, right? I try to enjoy the scenery but the physical exertion and my growing focus on reaching the summit are dominating my thoughts. The first doubts start to set in.

The rain has completely penetrated my supposedly waterproof jacket. No longer fascinated with high altitude training, my lungs seemed to be working at ¼ power. I start thinking about how I’d rather be back sitting in the car, which is really funny since I also recall earlier sitting in the car and wishing I were out moving around.

At this moment, Grace, who is part

goat, decides to leave the trail and go straight up the side of mountain. My mind groans, as it has to let go of the path it could see for one that has no framework. How can I be in control if I don't know what is coming next? I was pacing myself. We now move in a frenetic crawling run as we scramble up.

Stopping to catch our breaths, I mused at how silly we look trying to stand on such a steep grade. How did I get here? My thoughts become thick and syrupy. Balloon head. Grace notices also. She discovers that my clothing is soaked through and I'm not shivering. My skin was pale, cool and damp. I also lose the use of my hands.

I'm stripped of my wet clothes as I try to make jokes about my club-like hands. Here I was truly naked on the side of mountain at 12,000 feet. Unable to zip or button, I'm redressed by another. We do jumping jacks on the side of the mountain to

get my temp up. My mind, still frozen, gives up for now and thoughts are thankfully absent. Just presence.

It was time to choose. Up or down. Resolved, we continued our trip up. Cresting the final ridge, we arrived on a plateau of tundra two hours after we started. At this altitude the ground looks like the moon. No trees. No vegetation. No sounds. Sharing the same space with the clouds. As with all truly wondrous moments, words cannot adequately describe it.

Mu. Satori. Breakthrough. It is a piercing from one reality into another bigger picture. Like dreaming in a foreign language, I'm standing at the bottom of another Mountain; the Martial Path. The seductive and manicured trailhead began with a simple dojo website. I can't recall what naive thoughts I had about Aikido then but all I remember is the knowing that I had to do this. That somehow my life depended on it.



The quick ascent of the beginner's class moved on to regular practice as the weeks became months and then the months became years. Climbing. The trail is clearly marked with Ikkyo. Mask after mask falls off. Some resist. Most are painful to remove. I'm smiling on the inside, right? During this time I've made and lost friends, alienated my family, divorced, lost a pet, delivered a baby, found love and started to find myself.

Now preparing for my

Nidan test, I have left the trail again and I'm clawing my way up a different path. What have I been doing all these years? Naked and numb on the side of the mountain I look to be rescued and realize that no one is coming. I try and escape but can't. This time I will need to save myself. It's why I came on this journey. I feel desperation and know that I must be close to something. I need to move as the ground is crumbling underneath me. I try and temper my thoughts, for I know that this is a "true" journey, one without end.

Standing at the top of a mountain in Colorado, we are lost. There are no trail markers or signs of anything. A direction is chosen and we wander for thirty minutes. Everything is expansive. We come upon a Cairn, a sort of stone pyramid that hikers use to mark a path. I have a powerful experience, realizing that others have made this journey. Like bowing to the kamiza, we place our own stones on the pile to connect ourselves with those that have journeyed here before and to welcome those who will come. As we start our descent in silence, the events of trip down will remind us that there are no ordinary moments. ○

Onegaishimasu

by George Lyons

One of the things you often hear in the dojo is "don't get stuck"; as if we had some choice in keeping our assemblage of parts from getting frozen in place. Our stiffness in body and mind can be a perennial source of frustration.

You've probably experienced the brain freeze of whole techniques completely vanishing from memory. A more subtle form of mental pause

happens when we rush through techniques, unsure and unaware of what we are doing.

Our incompetence is illuminated and exasperated by the fact that there is a person on the receiving end of it. Equally exposed is our partner's ability or inability to adapt, neutralize and render our clumsiness harmless. Grabbing, twisting, smashing, breaking, we hurt one another. It's no different off the mat. With words, expressions, our overall demeanor, we do the same thing.

Maybe one day we'll be perfect. We'll know all things and flow freely from one moment to the next, responding appropriately with a huge generous spirit. Until then we'll have to do our best with our imperfections. We'll have to forgive ourselves and make every effort to do better. It's difficult but it's our promise and pledge to push one another to genuinely meet.

I make a request. Please forgive me as I forgive you. Let's train. ○

Aikido is for Everyday Life

by Jon Kugel

I have had this phrase rolling around in my head now for over a decade: aikido is for life. At first glance it seems contradictory. Aikido is a martial art and that means physical conflict to me. Given that we live in an advanced society that frowns on resolving personal differences through physical confrontation, the contradiction comes into focus. How can I apply a method of resolving physical conflict (aikido) in a world where physical conflict



is rare?

During the course of our lives, everyone is bound to experience failure. When we are infants, these failures are valuable learning experiences. We learn to walk, talk, and behave by watching adults and imitating them. Of course what works for the adult is not directly applicable by the infant. Trying many different behaviors, failures mount. Finally, the lessons taken from these failures become something more than the sum of their parts; they draw together into a body of experience which we can then apply to tackle even bigger challenges.

Somewhere along the line, however, we learn that failure at these bigger challenges can carry negative consequences... and not just for ourselves. These negative consequences can impact other people in our lives and ripple both outward into their lives and inward back into ours (miss a goal to lose the big game or run a stop sign, causing an accident). The more we experience failure and negative consequences, the more we seek to avoid them.

This is the state of being that I re-

call most vividly in my life: fear of the negative consequences of my choices/actions and the regret that follows. Once I told myself I was not going to regret my choices anymore, so I began telling lies (mostly to myself) to avoid the responsibility of making choices I thought might carry the stigma of failure. It worked in its own way. I functioned in the world and even began creating some modest success in my life. No one could assail me in the fortress I had constructed. No one could really meet me either.

This is why aikido is for life... to practice remembering what it was like when I was so new to this world that I didn't know enough to be afraid of failure or the judgment of others. When the threat of failure appears on the horizon (an aikido test, public speaking for work, or any other situation in which my actions/behavior are scrutinized), I reach for the same tools honed to precision taking ukemi during a demonstration, counting my breaths during zazen, or meeting a visitor to the dojo.

You can leave aikido in the dojo

if you want. It will still work and you may even experience some success. It isn't easy to come out of our personal fortresses and expose ourselves with all the warts and scars we've gathered along the way. Others may take advantage of us. Sensei says when we come to the mat we try to present ourselves. It takes courage to really present yourself.

Maybe the fear and anxiety we face in the dojo isn't any different from the fear and anxiety we avoid in our everyday lives. Maybe the failures we experience and the courage we nurture on the mat can help us tackle bigger challenges. Maybe you can come out of your fortress and I can come out of my fortress and we can practice presenting ourselves to each other on the mat, so that when we go out into the world we can really present ourselves there too. Onegaishimasu. ○

Manifest

by Pat King

If we are training sincerely the conceit of inferiority can be as paralyzing as the conviction of mastery

Both are delusions that create limits and remove us from directly experiencing the reality of the present moment.

"I can't, I'm scared, it hurts, I'm exhausted, why is he so heavy, why can't I move this person, this person is easy to move, I'm bored, piss me off, oh no not more break falls, FUTARI DORI YOU'RE KIDDIN' ME..." Mini twisters writhing through my mind slow me down way more than 58 years. The moment departs, filtered through a conditioned mind. I am caught like a

stink bug in a spider web, left in a snarled twist of emotion and tension.

I watched a stink bug die a long death in a spider's web this spring. At first he struggled, then after many, many days, became still - inevitable this slow ebb of energy that signals the coming of that unfathomable stillness. I couldn't resist poking at him to check if he was still alive, but I didn't free him. He became a symbol of my small self, Stink Bug Self, no offense meant to stink bugs. They have some job to do somewhere. But as a working metaphor, I let it be.

SBS has conceits and convictions that can be tiresome, destructive, sometimes boring; always searching for progress, always comparing, competing, judging, wanting and dodging. But I love that small self and all its facets, at least I'm attached to it in some way that could be called love. My convictions have served me well enough in life; helped with goal setting and intentions, with getting ahead and achieving. They have also let me slink away when some adversity hurt too much. The Razor's Edge (Lyons Sensei, Enso 8, 2011) shook the infrastructure of these ego constructs like an earthquake rattling a fault-line. I'm still reading and re-reading that article every so often. My reactions shifting from fear, to grief, to downright disbelief, to bellicose arguing. "A martial artist clings to nothing and so is not bound to a continuum of growth through efforts and practice." What about "shut up and train?" "Time invested in conventional com-

mitments is of no consequence...." What?

During zazen, more than on the mat, in the space between inhale and exhale, stillness comes and goes midst these busy thought loops playing again and again. Recognizing the persistent themes has helped manifest convictions that were largely invisible yet powerful drivers. Like comfortable old friends, sometimes they seem to be affirming the rightness of an action; other times they are critical lovers that keep me trapped in long conditioned patterns of thinking that drive a wedge between the here and the now. Just as there is a set of negatives (I can't, I'm not, that's pathetic), there is an equally entrenched set of positives that have shaped an honest existence out of chaotic possibility for a life of unwholesome pursuits (just keep walking! set the goal and go, I can do this, I've done it before). These form the skeletal framework of a mighty ego, the confines of a



small mind.

I remember a friend seeking me out years ago, constantly asking: “What do you believe in?” He needed to know where I stood on the big issues.

We’re SUPPOSED to have positions and convictions. It makes others uncomfortable when beliefs are not made clear and acted upon. I spent my youth acquiring convictions... conditioned first by my family’s own set of values, then the larger community’s – school, church, friends, books, teachers. I became those ideas and reactions. It all agglutinated into what became the superstructure of self-defense and the infrastructure of ego driven needs. It is survival.

I’m trying gluten free for a while, it’s easier with food than convictions. Fearful of losing convictions of love, loyalty, steadfast persistence, patience, monogamy—I wonder, where does that lead? In many cases it seems to lead to some kind of situational ethics in which each person calls the plays moment by moment; that’s in the now, that can be unconditionally in the moment. Yet, if we are not entirely honest and in touch with those often invisible infrastructures of ego motivations, it becomes easy to justify and rationalize behaviors that can hurt others, or ourselves.

Tolstoy examined the big questions about how to live in his book called “The Three Questions.” Jon Muth reworked the story with a Zen twist, replacing Tolstoy’s searching king with a boy and all the wise officials he consulted with animals who respond according to their true natures. In the stories, both protagonists found the answers lacking and

sought out a sage. They asked him 3 questions: “Who is the most important one?”; “When is the best time to do things?”; “What is the best thing to do?” After a series of moments and events, the sage (a hermit for Tolstoy, a turtle for Muth) reflected on the seeker’s behaviors and gave these answers: “Remember then: there is only one time that is important—Now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power. The most necessary man is the one you are with, for no man knows whether he will ever have dealings with that one again; and the most important affair is to do him good, because for that purpose alone was man sent into this life!”

Last year at sesshin, Genjo Osho spoke of two universal, core fears – fear of abandonment and fear of annihilation. The first leads us to take on convictions to identify with a group; the second appears to be about not just the death of our physical body but of the annihilation of all the acquired conditioning that keeps us caught in the web of our constructed convictions and preconceptions, suspended in delusions and separated from reality. This conditioned mind, the small mind, might be what Sensei was pointing at and challenging us to let go. Breakthrough imagined or remembered fears. Allow unconditioned mind, big mind to be clear of interference.

Simple, sustained effort, at Zazen or on the mat as a way of life may not bring us any closer to breaking through or being martial, but this dojo, this practice, this community, seem as good a way as any to carve out the space and time to investigate the nature of our conditioned selves. To begin to move, look and listen to

something bigger than that small self, and gently lay the fears down, manifest our true natures. This is a good place for that kind of effort.

If that’s a conviction, I’m not ready to lose it yet. ○

What is Aikido?

by Sebastian Brown

When someone asks me what aikido is, I wonder the same thing. It’s quite a curious phenomenon to spend so much time engaged in something and hardly feel satisfied in comprehending the scope of the experience. It’s so much more than a martial art that my response usually starts with a smile.

I want to explain to them that the subtle hesitation in answering is an example of why I train--that there’s wisdom in living presently, with a focus on connectedness. Being uke and participating in such dynamic movements stimulates parts of my body I hadn’t ever accessed before. Ukemi requires such a degree of comprehensive cohesion to allow appropriate reaction that it forces me to abandon the future and concentrate on the moment. What happens tomorrow at work is no longer relevant when attempting to dominate with a bokken. Indeed, more than a smile is needed.

Describing our weapons training effectively requires a clearing of the throat followed with a nice deep breath. The relation makes total sense to me, and yet I am continually amazed and baffled by how applicable and transferable it is to daily life. Would it help to tell them that my posture is a work in progress? Or rather, should I tell them how useful it will be the next time

I'm in a dark alley surrounded by a throng of thugs and have nothing but a baseball bat to defend myself? In reality though, every time I stand across from someone in the dojo, I'm learning something beyond self defense.

Weapons emphasize timing and distance. There is no standardized striking distance or human body size and with the added unpredictability of the other's mind, each encounter is new. Every motion must be adjusted accordingly. How can I relate to this person who's attempting to hit me? Trying my best to meet them through exercises such as kirio-toshi teaches me how to analyze my relationships to other things in life.

I've also had the chance to address a childhood imprint through jyo and bokken practice. Growing up I suffered a minor head trauma which my parents told me affected my temperament. Perhaps for the better as I had earned the nickname "Bruiser" after a tumultuous first couple years spent recklessly tossing my little frame wherever I could haphazardly direct it. This incident left me pretty shell-shocked and wary of anything flying close to my skull until I started training in weapons. Repeatedly trying to hit or avoid getting hit was an exhausting mental grind for someone like me who fears getting struck. However, it is necessary to overcome and relinquish such a conditioned response in order to pursue the truest form in our training.

I try to implement the same attitude of open, honest directness in each interaction. I feel compelled to dig deep to properly answer a question, even one as seemingly simple as how I spend most of my evenings.

I find it difficult to explain that aikido is much more than a martial art, because I cannot fathom how far-reaching it is. There's a great deal of comfort in knowing that I may never be able to, which is why I usually conclude with a smile, too. ○

Pain is Not My Enemy

by Virginia Ahlers

I have bad feet. I have always had bad feet. Being flat footed makes my arches hurt, my ankles hurt, my knees and often my hips and back. I've had more than five different types of orthotics over my lifetime. I go to podiatrists, chiropractors and massage therapists. Yet, I chose a job where I'm on my feet most of my day. I chose hobbies that stress my ankles and knees. Here I am at Aikido, sitting seiza, listening to Sensei talk. I love listening to Sensei talk. I want to absorb as much of his wisdom as I can. I try to let go of the ache in my knees and my ankles. I try not to think about it. I try not to squirm. I hate my feet.

When I started Aikido at BCA, I knew it would be hard on my muscles. I knew I'd be sore and tired. I'd wake up stiff and sore, stretch a bit, then go on with my day. I'd loosen up after a while and was fine. But then, my feet and knees started hurting. I was trying to practice 4-5 days a week. I wasn't sure if this was something else that my body needed time to get used to, or if it was trying to tell me that I was doing too much. But it didn't get better, it got worse. Every day, all day, my feet and knees ached. Am I doing something wrong? Falling the wrong way? Getting up the wrong way? I thought about the Feldenkrais les-

sons we had. How can I move with less effort? How can I put less stress on my knees? I started going slower and getting up more carefully. It helped a little.

At the time, I wasn't sure what was causing the extra stress. Was it my shoes? Being on my feet at work more? Falling and getting up repeatedly? Sitting seiza? Through April and May, I ended up at work for many long days and missed a lot of Aikido practice. After a few weeks, I noticed that my knees and feet didn't hurt as much. Accidental process of elimination.

I try to push through pain, to ignore it and do what I want anyway. I try to breathe and let it go. Tension holds on to the pain tightly. When I take a deep breath and let it out, sometimes the pain leaves too. But, I still hate it. I know that I should appreciate that I have a mostly healthy, strong body and I can do so many things. I know that pain is a good thing. It tells me that I can still feel, that I am still able bodied. It cautions me to be more careful. I want this body to still be able when it's 80.

So, if you see me sitting with my feet and knees in front of me instead of under me, you'll know why. I found that if I'm more careful, if I listen to the pain, if I don't push too much, too fast, hopefully I'll be able to come practice at BCA for a long, long time. ○

Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Thunder Road to Harmony

by Aaron Goldfinger

I tried iaido for the first time by throwing myself headfirst into a seminar. The experience was exactly as I expected – frustrating. But I wasn't surprised. For those who've trained with me, it shouldn't come as a surprise to you that from the first time I held a bokken in college I felt uncomfortable. I don't know what it is about holding a weapon, but something changes. It's difficult enough to bring my aikido to life, let alone extending it into a wooden stick.

When I got into my car on the way home from the seminar, I had the same sense of frustration as the first time I tried golf. Golfers will tell you there's always one shot that brings you back for another round. I'm not sure what member of the PGA said that, but I never hit that shot. Holding a sword was no different. As I pulled out of the dojo driveway, I didn't feel like listening to the radio. But I also didn't feel much like listening to myself and the frustration I was now carrying. I scrolled my iPod to Bruce Springsteen and connected it to my car stereo. A live acoustic version of Thunder Road came on. As I listened, I got to thinking.

Maybe you're not a Bruce fan. But the recording studio cut of Thunder Road contains the entire band – Clarence Clemons on saxophone, Max Weinberg on drums – the entire E Street ensemble. It totally rocks. But I always loved Bruce's live acoustic versions a bit more than their studio counterparts. This acoustic version of Thunder Road



is bare bones – Bruce on the piano, Bruce's vocals and a bit of harmonica. I never gave it much thought why this version – so different from the faster paced studio version – has so much life.

Darkness is present in all Bruce tunes from this era. But the darkness is sometimes lost in the rhythm of the entire band. This acoustic version is truly dark though. It's almost a totally different song – it forces you to pay attention to the words. But it should be lifeless. Next to the recording studio version it shouldn't hold a candle. But it does. And not just for me, but tons of fans.

It's the silence that breathes life into this version of this song. Music is more than just the notes. It's the silence between the notes. The silence in this version can be heard as loud as the Big Man's thundering saxophone solos.

After two years of practicing aikido, I can't remember how many times I have tried to focus on one aspect of my training that needs improvement. One class I tried focusing on where I was looking during prac-

tice. The next class I tried to figure out where my feet were pointing. Without fail, within minutes of starting class I forgot what it was I had intended to work on that day. So the next class I'd try to focus even more. I tried to the point that trying became a distraction. As a consequence I felt lots of noise with very little rhythm and no harmony.

Sensei will occasionally remind us that even when we sit, we position ourselves – our gut, our chin, etc. so that even though we are still, there is life. And when we practice, it should be quiet. Didier Sensei constantly told us the same. "You're rushing, but there is no life." Just as Bruce breathes new life into the acoustic version of Thunder Road, though subtly, we can breathe life into our practice by keeping it silent.

In the two years I have spent training, this is the most profound lesson that has penetrated my brain. But, like most of the advice I am given at the dojo, I understand it on an academic level. Still, when I practice I hear lots of noise. Noise can be effective and sometimes even beautiful. But it is not a requirement. Our

training is about finding harmony – in everything. It’s about cultivating a melody between uke and nage. It’s about keeping the music alive, extending ki, even when we are sitting.

Bruce has said that when he performs, his fans are not the audience; they are a part of the show. Although this is a very different relationship than that between uke and nage, the goal is somehow the same – to achieve harmony in the relationship; to deal with the person or people, not the just the note being played.

I did some Google searches and couldn’t find anything that talked about O’Sensei and music. However, I did find an interview with Chiba Sensei where he briefly talked about playing classical music periodically during zazen. But for each one of us, there is a rhythm to our practice. Sometimes I hear folks muttering “PA-POW, PA-POW” under their breath as we sit and watch a technique being demonstrated. This may not constitute music, but a rhythm is present and there is a harmony we bring to our practice.

For most of us, there is a rhythm to our lives. We get up the same time every morning, go to work, and so on. There is a rhythm to our thoughts and a rhythm to how we perceive and experience the world. The rhythm can be filled with noise – as it was when I became frustrated with my practice. Or it can be calm. But when the noise overshadows the rhythm, it can penetrate our ego. It’s the noise that leads to frustration and adversely influences our attitudes about our training, our progress and our egos. It’s up to us to choose whether we want the rhythm to shine through, or the noise. ○

Taking Off the Fear

by Yan Xu

I have been struggling with one problem, which is the essential reason for my daily Aikido practice, since I started my Aikido journey one year ago. Those old views are still very clear just like yesterday: I was so stiff that my partner could not finish up the technique, I was very nervous when I was rolling and even got an injury from a forward roll, I denied taking break falls and always lost the Ki connection from my partner. I was really confused and suffering during that period. “Aikido is martial art, don’t think about it when you are lost, just do it with your body,” said by Lyons sensei, repeated in my mind. So I just grabbed this only correct thing: stick with daily practice.

This idea was straightforward but very effective. I progressed fast in the following practice but became more eager to find out the meaning of my practice. Fortunately, the annual sesshin was held in our dojo and I joined without hesitation. In the first day, the long time sitting frustrated me and the pain during zazen almost killed me. Later in the dokusan session I asked Genjo, the Zen master, what is the essence of the pain during zazen? How can I stay with it and manage to “just let it go”? Instead of answering me immediately, he clapped his hand suddenly and rang a bell loudly after that. Then he told me that the pain was only a sensation, maybe slightly different from smell and sound because it was much louder. The essential thing that makes it very hard to stay with is fear. Yes, that is absolutely correct, and it seems be

the answer to my question of Aikido practice too.

People are always saying that Aikido is moving Zen. Thus if we can watch Aikido movement statically, every moment is a zazen. So it seems like we are doing countless zazens continuously. Then I realize that just as in zazen, the fear is the biggest obstacle for my Aikido. In zazen I fear the pain. I’m very worried that the pain will damage my body. Then my concentration moves onto the pain and makes it increasingly dominant. On the other hand, in my Aikido practice, I fear the potential pain of techniques from nage, thus I become stiff and nervous, which totally ruins the connection of Ki. In the meantime, I feared smashing onto the ground, so my ukemi was very bad. Finally, I have found the essential reason for my Aikido practice. That is taking off my fear.

Every time I do zazen, what I am really practicing is how to master my concentration (posture and breath) in the face of any negative sensation. It’s the same thing in Aikido. Throughout daily practice, I am training myself to get rid of fear, to keep my posture and movement proper and relax under any situation (such as while being attacked or controlled by others), and in the same time to feel the flowing connection of Ki. I’m very happy and grateful that in our dojo zazen is given such high importance. Actually, Sensei has been showing me the answer since the very beginning.

“Zen is the root of everything,” I was told by Genjo. So if we can visualize Aikido as the trunk and weapons training and Iaido as branches and leaves, we obtain an entire tree. And daily practice is just like water and sunlight which keep the tree grow-

ing and keeps each part functional. So, let's carry on and stick with our daily practice in Aikido. Then the process of taking off the fear proceeds. And our Aikido tree obtains good nutrition, which will finally lead us to find the way to understand Budo and the whole nature. ○

My Path to Aikido and Zazen

by Steven Ponce

“Study the teaching of the pine tree, the bamboo, and the plum blossom. The pine is evergreen, firmly rooted, and venerable. The bamboo is strong, resilient, and unbreakable. The plum blossom is hardy, fragrant, and elegant.”

Morihei Ueshiba

I began training in aikido in February of 2011. I found out about the dojo where I train (Aiki Farms Aikikai) after conducting a Google search of nearby dojos that offered what I call the aikido (martial art) and zazen (meditation) bundle. Why was I looking for such bundle and why was it important to me? At that time, I was working for a recognized pharmaceutical company. As you can imagine, I was working long hours, weekends, and I was feeling ‘out of center’. Yes, I know... it sounds cliché but it was true. I needed ‘something’ that would bring me back to center.

Since I'm a scientist, I began conducting research of what ‘that thing’ would be that would help me get back to my center. After reading a couple of articles and books, I concluded that one of the ‘things’ I was looking for was meditation. The other one was some sort of mar-

tial art. As a kid, I spent a couple of years training in tae kwon do. However, I never fell in love with the art because it entails confrontation. Essentially, I was looking for a martial art which had as its primary core harmony instead of confrontation. This is how I began training in Aikido and participating in Zazen.

Little did I know that Aikido and Zazen would soon become an integral part of my life. In the middle of April 2011, I decided to move in to the dojo and started my apprenticeship as uchi deshi under Burns Sensei. Slowly, I started to perform every task assigned as it was misogi. Eventually, I was not only practicing aikido in the mat, but I was also incorporating all its aspects in my personal and professional life.

As part of the training schedule in Aiki Farms, I was sitting zazen at least three days per week. At the beginning, this was more than sufficient. However, as I started to embrace more and more Zazen, I began looking for deeper connection and understanding. One day, after reviewing the events section in the Birankai website, I noticed

that Bucks County Aikido (BCA) was going to offer its annual zazen and weapons retreat (sesshin) with Genjo Marinello Osho. As a result, a group from Aiki Farms drove down to Pennsylvania to participate in the three-day sesshin. During my stay in BCA, I felt a strong sense of respect for the dojo, its students and for Lyons Sensei, Shihan. One week later upon my return to Connecticut, I was asking permission from my Sensei to visit and train at BCA for one week as an uchi deshi.

During the week of November 07 – 12, I got the opportunity to visit and train at BCA. For the period of my stay, I was able to help in the farm as well in the gift shop. In addition, I participated in zazen sessions and took all aikido classes. Even though it was just one week, I truly believe that I grew as a person and as an aikidoka. On a personal note, I remember before stepping onto the mat, I emptied my cup and tried to be like a sponge (absorbing everything that I can). Also, the words that Burns Sensei is constantly repeating came to my mind: “This is it, right here and right now,” as well as “Stay present... observe what is



going on.”

I truly enjoyed and treasured all the lessons learned from Sensei and his students that were kind enough to train with me. I remember their comments such as “relax, relax... drop the shoulder,” “stay connected,” “don’t tense your arm,” “don’t rush... practice the technique slowly,” and most certainly I will not forget how to take ukemi for the iriminage technique.

Finally, thank you Burns Sensei, Lyons Sensei, and the entire families from Aiki Farms and Bucks County Aikido for all your support. I hope to see you all on the mat soon. ○

My Month as Uchi Deshi

by Greg Regan

My journey in Aikido started in college. It was the fall of 2003 and my friend had just started taking classes and talked about it incessantly. One night, in the middle of a quiet suburban street, I asked him to put his money where his mouth was and show me something. He said, “Grab my wrist,” and so I did. Next thing I knew I was bent over backwards and about to be thrown down on the pavement. I would later recognize this as Shihonage. By January of 2004 I began to attend classes 5 days a week and could not stop thinking about it. At work, while on the phone in my cubicle, I would stand up and go through the motions of different techniques. I was certifiably crazy about Aikido. This condition has persisted and I believe there is no cure.

Let’s fast forward to more recent times. When I lost my job that I had

relocated to PA for, my initial reaction was to come and train. After giving it some thought, I decided to put my professional life on hold and take the plunge into an Uchi Deshi program. Sensei graciously accepted me into his care for the month of October and I began training in the first week. I thoroughly enjoyed the training during that first week, especially one particular noon class when Sensei called me to be uke and introduced me to the mat quite enthusiastically. That 45-minute class felt like several hours, and this was only the beginning.

After the first week of struggling through intense classes, and finding out what it means to be Uchi Deshi, I was dealing with many conflicting emotions. One minute, I reveled in the moment, and the next I was ready to quit Aikido all together. I mean, I had been at this for over 7 years, and I’m still only 3rd kyu. At a certain moment, late at night in the loft, I was contemplating everything and felt like maybe Aikido wasn’t for me. The next day, I went to lunch with Eric Soroker, and my whole attitude began to change. As we were driving to the burger joint, I said to him, “I need a little pick me up, please just tell me one thing that is good about my Aikido technique.” His reply was epic: “Actually, you suck.” I laughed, but was momentarily stunned, and a little hurt. It turns out that this is exactly what I needed to hear. It also reminded me about something Eric said to me previously. He mentioned that he really liked my “good energy” and “enthusiasm of practice.” It suddenly occurred to me that perfect technique was irrelevant. I was here not to learn techniques really, but to learn something much more important. What that thing is, I am still learning and cannot readily describe

with words, but I now know that it has very little to do with proficiency of technique. Technique and power are merely by-products of the journey.

Now, after my Uchi Deshi experience, I return to my home dojo in Providence with a new appreciation for community, and less appreciation for rank, technique, and power. I will admit that I still get hung up on those things sometimes, but now, my Aikido is much more of a journey for the sake of journeying, and not just a quest for power, rank, and excitement. Thank you all for your kindness and for sharing your practice with me on the mat. I hope to see you all again soon. ○

Recommended Reading

Why We Hurt: The Natural History of Pain

By Dr. Frank T. Vertosick Jr.

T.S. Eliot called pain “God’s megaphone.” In Aikido, Zazen, the Feldenkrais method, or just walking around, the fact that we are a bundle of nerves can feel like a blessing and a liability. Since it was published nearly ten years ago, some of the medical research might be dated, but it is still a good read.

